



Almost Spring

As I write, we're still only a week into February, and the snow has been falling since dawn. For you, reading this, it's the beginning of March. Snow is less likely, the days are noticeably longer, and we feel, finally, that winter is losing its dominance. But there are still many cold bleak days to endure until the solstice finally proclaims spring for real. How does a gardener get through the home stretch?

I've been looking for signs of spring, but they're not there. Not yet. Braided lines of pawprints and hoofprints in the snow emerge from the woods, crisscross my yard, and disappear again. The hellebore may be blooming by now but, hidden under a foot of snow, it's anybody's guess. A group of deer kneels on the hillside beyond my pond; I know they probably rest there all year round, but they're only visible when the trees are bare of leaves and the snow shows them in stark contrast. I'll know it's spring when they become invisible again.

By mid-March the clocks will change—not a minute too soon—and then it will be time to prune summer-flowering shrubs, like roses and buddleia. But there are still weeks to wait. And so, despite the snow, I've just been out to cut an armful of forsythia branches. Their brown stems and tight buds are glazed with ice, but in just a week those unpromising nibs will unfurl to soft green leaves and cheerful yellow flowers. Already, the slender branches in a vase add wistful grace to my living room.

Many flowering trees and shrubs can be forced, but the forsythia is fastest and most reliable. Close behind, needing two weeks to flower, are redbud, pussy willows, and red maple. If you have any of these, cut some now to get a head start on spring. Cut branches on the diagonal to maximize water uptake, don't place the vase too close to a radiator, and change the water every few days to prevent bacterial growth. That's all that's necessary, but nobody is going to stop you from adding a few cut flowers, if you choose.

(A note in passing on how to prune forsythia. This plant, like many flowering shrubs, blooms best on new growth. It follows that, if you prune at the top in order to maintain a desired height, you'll end up with a rather ugly shrub, with thick, inflexible branches and few flowers. If, instead, you prune out the thickest one-third of stems at ground level each year, you'll stimulate new growth. The result will be a shorter, graceful fountain of a plant with slender, arching stems covered with flowers.)

Houseplants help ease our greensickness. (Is that a word? If we can be homesick, surely we can be greensick, too?) Indoor plants improve air quality, (by how much is debated) but they also do wonders for your mood, and even your ability to concentrate. Good news for those of us still coping with pandemic-induced work-from-home situations, or anyone feeling a bit restless. Even the most common varieties, like philodendron and rubber plant, offer that much-missed sense of connection to the natural world when your daily check discovers a new stem, a new leaf, maybe even, oh joy, a flower or two. Houseplants can require more fussing than their outdoor counterparts: without rain, they need consistent watering; without natural soil enrichment, they need food; without natural predators to keep pests in check, they need careful monitoring. At the same time, unless you're lucky enough to have a greenhouse, the smaller number means they take far fewer hours of work than the gardens of summer will require.

For novices there is a range of indestructibles. First on the list are succulents and cacti, hard to kill unless you water them to death. No-one will ever make me a fan of spiky cacti (except Eastern prickly pear with its bright yellow flowers. Yes, Connecticut has a native cactus!) but chubby little succulents can be very endearing. Beyond these two obvious choices, there's a long list of very forgiving plants, including parlor palm, spider plant, the non-spiky Christmas cactus, colorful croton, peace lily, aloe, draecena, and sansevieria, commonly known as snake plant or mother-in-law's tongue (how rude!). They're mostly foliage plants but, given the right conditions, some will surprise you with a flower or two. With or without flowers, any of them will keep your green thumb busy until we can finally, exuberantly, once again dig outside.